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**Reading Response-Internet Safety**

1. While it is important to keep messages age-appropriate, there are certain things that young children should know about going online. For older elementary and middle school students there are some basics to know about the internet that are very important. It is an opportunity to teach them independence. The internet is largely uncensored. This means that it is up to the users themselves to be safe. Remind children that with independence comes responsibility. It is crucial that children never give out personal information or pictures without parental permission. Also, it is never okay to arrange to meet someone that they’ve met online without a parent present in a public setting. Another important lesson is that they should never give out any internet passwords to anyone, not even friends. This can leave children vulnerable to many types of internet harassment.

2. Virtually all teenagers are regular users of the internet. Many are now users of social networking sites. Although Facebook nominally has a minimum age requirement, many younger users lie about their age in order to set up an account (as I discovered when I received a friend request from my ten year old nephew!) Even though, high school students may be accustomed to using social networking, there are still precautions they should be aware of. While seemingly innocuous, social media is not without risk. Students should always think before they post anything, as it can be exceedingly difficult to take things back. Students should also refrain from using sites like Foursquare or Facebook’s Check-in feature, because revealing where they are could be potentially dangerous. They should also remember not to post anything that they wouldn’t want others to see. The public nature of social media ensures that others will, in fact, see everything they post. They should be encouraged to set limits on the amount of time they spend on social media so that they don’t get distracted from the real world. It is important to achieve a good balance. Finally, just as in real life, they should be reminded to choose their friends wisely.

3. Cyberbullying is another potential problem teens can face online and it can take many forms. Sometimes it can be emails, text messages, or social media posts that directly threaten harm. Sometimes the intent isn’t to threaten but to embarrass. In some instances, teens have been the victims of others who have posted fake online profiles in their name with the purpose of humiliating them. Cyberbullying is no joke, and can cause serious problems. Students should be made aware that it is never okay, can be considered criminal, and if so, is easily traceable. To avoid becoming victims, students should be advised not to respond to inflammatory emails, text messages, or comments on social media. If they have already been victimized, they should save the evidence and have their parents contact the internet service provider so that the offending item can be removed. If cyberbullying persists or is of a serious nature, the school, and perhaps even the police should be contacted.

4. Once cameras and cell phones were combined it was probably only a matter of time before “sexting” became a problem. When people send explicit photos of themselves to others, there are many potentially serious consequences. Some students have lost their place on athletic teams or been expelled from school as a result of sexting. (Adults are not immune from this either, as ex-Congressman Anthony Weiner can attest to!) Once these photos are forwarded out, they are uncontrolled and can be spread around to others, and can even wind up in the hands of sexual predators. These photos can have a long lifespan, and may even turn up years later in a Google search, with potentially embarrassing implications as they can be discovered by college admissions officers, future employers, future significant others, and even worse, maybe even your future kids! Sexting can also come with legal consequences. If the subjects of the photos are underage, criminal charges of distributing child pornography can be filed. In short, sexting is never a good idea, don’t do it!

5. Security while online is another major concern that may not be fully understood by students. Anyone who goes online without taking certain precautions may be vulnerable to threats including hackers, computer viruses, or spyware. It is important that teens be aware that they should set strict privacy settings on their social networking sites, and only “friend” people that they know. They should be careful to never post any internet passwords online where they may be used by others to hack into their sites, and potentially even steal their identity. Never should emails from unknown senders be opened, it could have computer viruses or spyware attached. Finally, in order to keep their computer safe students should never download anything online without their parent’s permission.